

THE MIND OF A CHILD
(Presented to music teachers' associations in 1995 and 1996)
Dr. Susan Dersnah Fee, www.dersnah-fee.com

A basic principle for teachers to remember is that we are not just teaching music. We are teaching an individual person through music. Too often early music instruction becomes an assembly line of the same words lesson after lesson. Take time to talk to the child to find out his/her personal interests. Take a few minutes to find out what is happening in their lives. It is not a waste of time to talk. Sometimes what they need to tell you is shockingly important. Other times it serves to put them at ease for their lesson. It makes them feel important that you care, and they will then try harder.

I have come to believe that we frequently underestimate the depth of feeling of young children. We think of them as naive, whereas, in their own minds they have unbelievable expectations of themselves, especially if they have an older sibling. All students are VERY self-critical and do not assume they have done well just because you do not correct them. They do not believe they have done well unless you specifically tell them that they have. They want to please us, so let them know they have done so and that you are proud of them.

Treat the child with respect as if you anticipate their success. Say "I can't wait to hear this piece because I know you can play it beautifully." Give them responsibility within their ability level, so that if they follow through on the task they are assured of success. Try never to criticize without complimenting first.

Students admire people they like. Show your own personality and be human to them. Show your commitment, love, and involvement with music. Be enthusiastic and energetic. Robert Schumann said, "Nothing worthwhile can be accomplished in art without enthusiasm." Exaggerate and make your points obvious. Build on those in your choice of repertoire and choice of illusions and vocabulary. For example, do not say "play loudly here," but rather, "pretend you are a tyrannosaurus rex." You not only capture the student's imagination, but you let him/her know you are listening. Be someone your students enjoy being around. Have you ever seen a teacher who made you wonder why they went into teaching--who did not even seem to like the students? During contact hours it is our job to be "on." Teaching is a performance.

The appropriateness of repertoire is another very individual thing. Choose it with the interests and the ability of this child in mind. Assign the amount of material this child can manage well. Help each child set personal goals. Enter children in performance events (including your own recitals) playing pieces they do especially well, have known for a while, and that they really love.

We must build self-esteem. This is especially true for the younger children in a family. Be sure each child has his/her own lesson time. I once taught an older student who still talked of feeling worthless. When she was young, she was tacked on to her older sister's lesson (with a different teacher) and often got no lesson because the teacher ran over with the older sister. While respecting a family's budget, it is important that each child has some music that is his/her own. This can easily be accomplished through using different supplementary materials. If children are close in age, they should not play the same pieces at the same time. It is always demoralizing to one of them. They should not be forced to play duets with siblings unless they want to. Perhaps pair them with friends rather than with relatives! Let children choose their own goals.

Individualizing our teaching strategies to suit each student's personality and needs is one of the most creative aspects of teaching. We must all enjoy the challenges of this process and always remember that we are sharing something that we all love with each child and that we are unique in many children's lives in the one-on-one relationships which we have with them. Enjoy the journey into the mind of each child in your studio.